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NSC FOR PHU

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PINR PREL PTER TH MY ID

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: STALLED PEACE DIALOGUE AWAITS SIGNAL FROM NEW GOVERNMENT

REF: A. BANGKOK 125 (SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: NEW PM ABHISIT'S PLAN)
1B. 08 CHIANG MAI 177 (DEMISE OF SECRET PEACE DIALOGUE)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Mike Morrow, CG, ConGen, Chiang Mai.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary and Comment

11. (S) Mark Tamthai, former RTG point-man for secret talks with southern insurgents, has expressed cautious optimism that the peace dialogue might be resumed under the new Democrat Party-led government. He told CG January 14 that PM Abhisit has asked if he would be willing to resume his former role as RTG lead for the dialogue, suspended months ago by the previous government. Tamthai tempered this hope with uncertainty about dynamics inside the new government regarding commitment to the peace process and proposed new administrative structures for handling it. In his view, the "old guard" has already won the first bureaucratic battle over southern policy by blocking the government's plan to set up a new office under the PM to coordinate all aspects of the southern issue. Meanwhile, Tamthai reports that the various southern insurgent groups and their exile leaders are working toward developing a more unified, stronger position in future peace talks, the suspension of which they do not believe is permanent.

12. (S) Comment: Tamthai's view on the fate of the proposed new agency for southern affairs is bleaker than that of other observers, who report the legislative process for creating it is still ongoing, albeit slow and difficult (Ref A). It appears he has mistaken what is intended as a temporary, interim measure as an end-state alternative; it is likely he is not fully in the loop with the new government. Yet Tamthai is consistent with others in identifying key obstacles to advancing reconciliation in the South, including: the military and security community's reluctance to give up its preeminent role on southern policy; and uncertain support for a conciliatory approach to the South across political lines both within the Democrat Party and among its junior coalition partners. His comments regarding efforts

by disparate insurgent groups to coordinate a more unified position were echoed by Henri Dunant Centre facilitator Michael Vatikiotis in a late December conversation with Bangkok DCM.
End Summary and Comment.

On Your Mark, Get Set . . .

¶3. (S) CG met January 14 in Chiang Mai with Mark Tamthai, Director of Payap University's Institute of Religion, Culture and Peace and former RTG point-man for secret talks with southern insurgents. Tamthai expressed cautious optimism that the secret dialogue - suspended for months by the previous People's Power Party-led governments (Ref B) - might be resumed under the new Democrat Party-led government. Since taking office in December, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva has stated publicly that resolving the southern conflict is a priority (Ref A). According to Tamthai, Abhisit asked him shortly before taking office if he would be willing to resume his former role as the government's lead for the secret dialogue. Tamthai is quite willing, but evoked uncertainty about dynamics inside the new government regarding commitment to the peace process and proposed new administrative structures for handling it.

¶4. (S) As background, Tamthai related his concern about divisions inside the Democrat Party between what he described as newer party members and the old guard. The former want a "new direction" in Thai politics, including movement toward a

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political solution to the southern conflict. The party's old guard, on the other hand, is more interested in governing for the sake of governing and relatively comfortable with the status-quo, security-focused approach in the south. This old guard, he added, has a like-minded approach toward the southern conflict with old guard officials at the top of the military and security apparatus.

. . . Wait

¶5. (S) In Tamthai's view, the old guard has already won the first bureaucratic battle over the new government's southern policy. He referred to late-December press reports that the government planned to establish a new agency to replace the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC), which is subordinate to the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), with a new agency supervised directly by the PM or his deputy. But on January 13 the government announced it had established a special cabinet committee to take charge of affairs in the South, chaired by the PM. According to Tamthai, this was a "backward step" from the earlier proposal for a new agency to replace the SBPAC. He said this reflected a compromise between the old guard (especially in the military), which strongly opposed forming a new agency, and the newer group, which supported it. The Army did not want to place the ISOC under the new agency and surrender control of its budget. Tamthai lamented that the special cabinet committee was too big to be effective, and that the SBPAC would remain in place.

¶ 16. (S) (Comment: Tamthai's analysis is at odds with that reported in Ref A by a leading southern policy official in the PM's office, who asserted that the special cabinet committee was a temporary measure to boost civilian control and more effectively direct resources in the interim until draft legislation developed to establish a permanent body to replace the SBPAC is passed. This official's view is consistent with comments made by PM Abhisit in a January 14 press conference, though both have acknowledged the difficulty of pushing through the required legislation. End Comment).

Silver Lining

¶ 17. (S) Despite his dim view of the special cabinet committee, Tamthai expressed hope about its authority of its chairman - PM Abhisit - to set up and fund subcommittees. He believes Abhisit is inclined to revive the secret dialogue and may seek to have Tamthai head up a subcommittee devoted to it. Yet Tamthai was cautious on this point, noting that the coalition government was fragile and that he had not spoken with the PM since just before he took office.

Other Players Waiting, Regrouping

¶ 18. (S) Tamthai provided brief comments on various other players involved in the southern issue:

-- Insurgents. The various southern insurgent groups and their
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exile leaders continue to come together with the aim of having a more unified, and stronger, position in any future peace dialogue. The insurgents attribute the suspension of the dialogue to the domestic political crisis that had gripped Bangkok for months, and do not feel the door is closed to its resumption. The groups have been meeting periodically to build bridges between those leaders who "control" insurgent fighters on the ground, and those who do not but are nonetheless in a position to contribute intellectually to the cause. Should the peace process resume, the insurgents may be in a position to consider confidence-building measures and new administrative arrangements for the southern provinces.

-- National Security Council. Tamthai has long been harshly critical of current NSC Secretary General Surapon Puanaiyaka, whom he fingers as responsible for shutting down the peace dialogue last year. Well placed sources say Surapon - an army general and protege of former PM Thaksin - should be gone soon, though he is a savvy bureaucratic survivor who might keep his post through protection from RTA Commander Anupong Paochinda. In any case, the NSC is nowhere to be found on the organizational chart for the new special cabinet committee, though this might change if/when Surapon is moved out.

-- Henri Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. The HDC, which had facilitated the secret dialogue, is "very close" to the Democrat Party. It is not inconceivable that, were the secret dialogue to resume, the HDC (with the DP's blessing) would bypass Tamthai's old structure, which was under the NSC and worked closely with security agencies and the RTA. A different arrangement next time around might not be a bad idea, Tamthai mused after noting that an RTG weakness was its lack of a civilian-controlled organization to handle security issues.

-- King Prajadhipok Institute. This quasi-governmental think-tank that advises parliament on policy issue has formed a new "Reconciliation Society" that sees a role for itself on the southern issue. KPI, however, is closely tied to the government, RTA and Royal Thai Police, and moreover has no contact with insurgent leaders. KPI receives some financial support from the Asia Foundation, which itself seeks a role in contributing training and scholarly research to peace efforts in the South.

-- Malaysian Government. Because the GoM's main concern is to avoid having separatist sentiment in southern Thailand spill over into northern Malaysia, its relations with insurgent exiles living in Malaysia are tense.

-- Indonesian Government. Vice President Kalla still aspires to the role of peace broker by leveraging his ties with some retired RTA generals and support from a Finnish NGO. Insurgent exile leaders, given their tense relations with Malaysia, see Indonesia as more neutral and are more comfortable operating there.

-- Deputy Prime Minister for Security Affairs Suthep Thaugsuban. Tamthai characterized Suthep as a Democrat Party old guard. His flair for cutting political deals is not the type of skill that would solve the southern conflict. Suthep has no special ideas or knowledge regarding the South, and in Tamthai's last discussion with PM Abhisit about the South and potential players in a revived peace process, Suthep's name did not come up. (Note: Yet Suthep has been named deputy chair of the special cabinet committee).

-- Democrat Party Advisor Chuan Leekpai. The former Prime Minister is widely expected to have a role, but as of now there is no organizational structure from which he could operate.

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¶9. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.
MORROW